

# Edible Anthology: Food in Literature

*Food captured in writing can be a literary feature as thought provoking as it is appetizing.*

by Hannah Scott (Editing and Publishing '22)  
with Simon Laraway (Editing and Publishing '23)

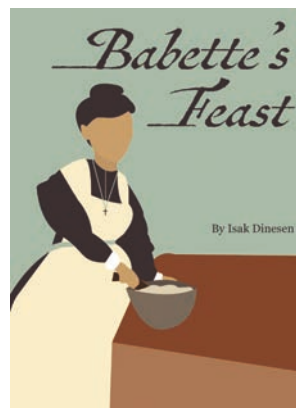
WE CAN ALL remember stories and books that made our mouths water with the meals they described. I remember the hot, foamy tankards of Butterbeer in the Harry Potter series; the moist, dense, 18-inch chocolate cake served to Bruce Bogtrotter in *Matilda*; and the toasted cheese spread over a large slice of bread from the classic *Heidi*. I wanted to taste these foods, to pull them from the pages and try them myself.

Sometimes this desire to try the food from our favorite books seems attainable. But it is not always as satisfying as we would hope: I have tasted the “Butterbeer” served at Universal Studios, and, admittedly, my first sip of the stuff out of a plastic cup at an amusement park was not quite the magical experience I had hoped for based on the books. Professor Jamie Horrocks (English) had a similar experience: she was captivated by a tasty description of Turkish delight in *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, but her first taste of the sweet contrasted distinctly with her expectations. (You can read the story and try the recipe for yourself in *A Taste of Humanities*.)

Indeed, there seems to be a gap between the words on the page and real-life food. Sometimes the foods trapped within the words of our favorite books entice us more insistently than food in real life. Great writers realize this. In the hands of skilled authors, food in literature does more than make our mouths water; it can be used as a literary tool to teach, to inspire, to move—a tool perhaps all the more powerful for its ability to stay with us by sparking both our imagination and sense of taste.

In the following interviews, faculty and staff share with us examples of food in literature across a range of literary traditions—from Western epics to Japanese surrealism—demonstrating the variety of ways authors use food to appeal not only to the stomach but to the mind and heart.

## The Spiritual Nature of Food



A discussion with Christopher Oscarson (Scandinavian Studies and Interdisciplinary Humanities) about how “Babette’s Feast” by Isak Dinesen uses a shared meal to suggest the spiritual unification of characters.

In the short story “Babette’s Feast” by Isak Dinesen (aka Karen Blixen), a meal courtesy of a foreigner unites a fractured, dwindling group of Christian parishioners in a Norwegian village. The story might not invoke any overt spirituality, but Associate Professor Christopher Oscarson explains that the story blends the spiritual with the secular.

Describing the beginning of the scene, he says, “It has been years since the charismatic leader of their pietist sect passed away, and now there are only a handful of his devoted followers left. The last of this congregation have become petty with each other and unforgiving. Babette, who came to the village as a refugee, finds herself in possession of a winning lottery ticket. She implores the group to allow her to use the money to make ‘a real French dinner’ for them. Tepidly, they agree but are later horrified as the supplies unloaded from the ship include strange, exotic ingredients.”

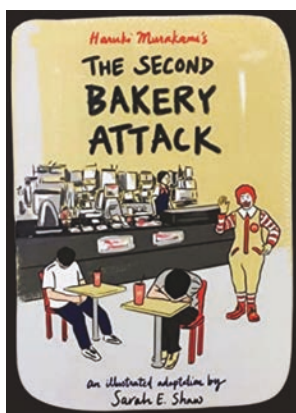
Strange ingredients result in strange dishes, but the hesitant villagers slowly warm to the foreign cuisine as Babette’s feast wins them over. Dr. Oscarson says, “They cannot resist giving themselves over to turtle soup, amontillado, *Blinis*

*Demidoff*, and *Cailles en Sarcophage*—the signature dish of the Café Anglais in Paris.”

Unbeknownst to them, the villagers are partaking of a meal fit for the finest café in Paris, but the meal fades into the background as they reforge connections with each other. Oscarson points out that Dinesen’s presentation of the significance of the meal takes on a sacramental air, uniting the alienated parishioners under the healing power of food. He says, “The shared experience of the sight, taste, and smell of the meal becomes sacramental as it lifts their souls to new possibilities that reignite spiritual bonds.”

This feast renews the spirituality that once unified the village, its meaning transcending the food itself. “Heaven and earth meet over the table set by Babette.”

## The Motivating Power of Hunger



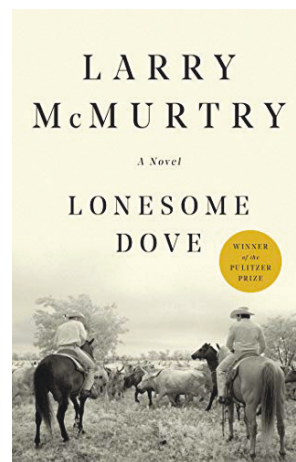
A discussion with Marc Yamada (Japanese and East Asian Film, Literature, and Culture), on how “*The Second Bakery Attack*” by Murakami Haruki uses food hijinks in metaphorical, oblique ways to explore cultural and personal identity.

Hunger—that is, the body’s response to lack of food—sometimes serves to be a more powerful literary device than food itself. In the Japanese short story “The Second Bakery Attack,” physical, psychological, and metaphorical hunger drive the plot, according to Associate Professor Marc Yamada. In the story, a newlywed couple find themselves afflicted by midnight hunger. The husband tells his wife how he once attempted to rob a bakery of bread during a similar bout of hunger, only to have the bakery owner hand over the bread on the condition the husband listen to Wagner with him. Inspired by the story of the odd, botched robbery, the couple decide to carry out a similar heist. So they rob a McDonald’s—the only restaurant open late at night—for thirty Big Macs.

“The larger theme is this idea of hunger and its different manifestations,” says Dr. Yamada. The story has different kinds of hunger throughout: the characters’ physical hunger for food, an existential hunger for identity, the reader’s hunger for unanswered questions, and an overall hunger for meaning in the abstractness of the story itself.

The author also displays a hunger for understanding or fulfilling his own identity. Murakami Haruki lived through the 1960s and ‘70s in Japan, so he witnessed the push of student revolutionaries (himself included) toward communism. When he became a famous author, he found himself gaining wealth and giving in to capitalism as the student movement

faded. In a way, his writings show how he and his characters look back and feel regret because they compromised and changed who they were. To that, Dr. Yamada says, “In some ways, that reflects maybe how Japan felt about itself in the 1980s: We’re really rich, but who are we? Do we really understand ourselves?”



## The Poetry of the Mealtime Routine

A discussion with Scott Hatch (Digital Media and Communications) about how food draws him into Larry McMurtry’s *Lonesome Dove* by providing an opportunity to meditate on the ritual of cooking.

We sometimes overlook the ritual of making food, whether it be the food in our real lives or in literature we love. For

Editorial Advisor Scott Hatch, the scene of a character preparing a humble meal in *Lonesome Dove* is unremarkable in itself, yet “few passages in Western literature move our hearts like the ritually simple, lyrical moments in the epic Western novel *Lonesome Dove* when Augustus McCrae tends his Dutch oven biscuits.” The passage in the novel reads,

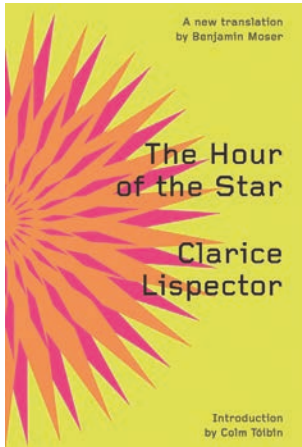
He molded his biscuits and went out and got a fire going while it was still good dark—just enough of a fire to freshen up his bed of mesquite coals. When he judged the oven was ready, he brought the biscuits and his Bible out in the backyard. He set the biscuits in the oven and sat down.

Hatch points out that “the passage establishes believability while also accomplishing the poet’s task of showing us the miracle in the mundane.” The passage goes on to say,

It was good reading light by then, so Augustus applied himself for a few minutes to the Prophets. He was not overly religious, but . . . he did consider himself a fair prophet and liked to study the styles of his predecessors.

*Lonesome Dove* is a mammoth novel, spanning almost 850 pages and dealing with death, friendship, and unrequited love, but, as Hatch says, simple scenes like these are where the narrative truly resonates. The quirks and the idiosyncrasies of the character begin to shine through as we are presented with Augustus’s quotidian mealtime habits, and the reader is invited to step into the scene. Hatch comments, “In such a sensorily evocative setting, we are ready to believe the unfolding of Augustus’s neoclassically heroic character as if we were sitting next to him, waiting for those biscuits.”

## Food as Commentary



**A discussion with Marlene Esplin (Contemporary US and Latin American Literature) on a bizarre yet resonant bite which drives home social commentary from *The Hour of the Star* by Clarice Lispector.**

Pleasant and familiar foods are often featured in stories we love. However, from time to time the food that characters eat—or imagine eating—diverts from the norm, leaving

an unprecedented impact on us. Associate Professor Marlene Esplin explains that *The Hour of the Star* by Clarice Lispector features one such use of food. The book tells the story of Macabéa, “an endearing and hapless protagonist who is so poor that she eats hot dogs every day,” Dr. Esplin says. Poor, unhealthy, and deemed unattractive, Macabéa is nevertheless an obsessive consumer who dreams of stardom and wealth. She defines herself by her drink of choice, Coca-Cola, which she associates with glamour and luxury.

Neither hot dogs nor Coca-Cola are particularly strange—the odd fare comes when something in a magazine catches her eye. “At one point, Macabéa sees an ad for a lotion or face cream, and she imagines that if she had the money to

buy the cream, she’d eat heaping spoonfuls of it,” Dr. Esplin says. Macabéa imagines that the expensive lotion, which wealthy people have easy access to, might revitalize her undernourished body.

This bizarre notion catches us off guard. Consider this: what would it be like to eat a spoonful of nighttime face cream? As we picture the sensation, we find ourselves better able to understand how unfamiliar Macabéa is with the comforts we enjoy. To her, our most mundane possessions are mysterious, miraculous luxuries which she would not know how to use if she had them. “The food and consumerist references in the novel seem to point to the unattainability of a certain lifestyle or mode of consumption for someone like Macabéa,” Dr. Esplin says. “Coca-Cola, hot dogs, and lotion all bear a little bit of Macabéa for me.”

## Conclusion

Hunger quelled with a Big Mac stolen in a late-night robbery. An imagined bite of a spoonful of face cream. A Dutch oven full of biscuits browning as the sun is rising. A luxurious French meal miraculously conjured in a rustic Norwegian setting. The images and sensations in these excerpts transcend mere sensory experience; they evoke profound authorial intentions and literary purposes. Maya Angelou once described literature as “life-giving”—perhaps literature’s power to give us life, to sustain us and feed us, is never so distinct as when it draws on the power of food. 📖

## Your Food in Literature Stories

This brief article cannot pretend to catalogue the many ways authors use food in their writing. Food in literature is endlessly diverse and varied, especially when readers offer their own interpretation.

We would love to hear about your experiences with food in literature: What examples in your own reading enticed you? Did a certain food make you want to travel to a country or region? Did it pull you into the story, as it did Scott Hatch? Did the description of a unique food leave you scratching your head, as it did Dr. Esplin? Did the first taste of a food meet your expectations, or did it leave you wanting something different? Send us your story in 50–200 words to [humanitiespr@byu.edu](mailto:humanitiespr@byu.edu), and we will consider it for publication in the coming issue of the magazine.

ACROSS 1. SPF, 4. TSP, 7. DDS, 10. Sob, 13. Kid, 14. WWE, 15. Are, 16. Era, 17. Italian, 19. Mexican, 21. Attn, 22. NATO, 23. French, 26. Danish, 30. Torah, 31. ACE, 34. NSAID, 35. Pin, 36. Yeardot, 39. MCL, 40. Greek, 41. Aah, 44. Goodman, 46. Opt, 49. Snail, 51. NSA, 52. Eerie, 54. Hotdog, 56. Daybed, 57. Ores, 59. Pare, 60. English, 63. Swedish, 67. Poe, 68. Ese, 69. SAS, 70. Sea, 71. Ant, 72. Sod, 73. TNT, 74. Hem

DOWN 1. Ski, 2. Pit, 3. FDA, 4. Twitchy, 5. Swath, 6. Penn, 7. Damm, 8. Dread, 9. Sextant, 10. Sec, 11. Ora, 12. Ban, 18. Lana, 20. Ions, 23. FTP, 24. Roi, 25. Ern, 27. Iam, 28. Sic, 29. HDL, 31. Aaron, 32. Creds, 33. Edema, 37. Ego, 38. Oka, 41. Ash, 42. Ano, 43. Hat, 44. Glories, 45. Nearest, 46. Orb, 47. Pie, 48. TED, 50. Idol, 53. Eyed, 55. Gesso, 56. Dawan, 58. Shed, 59. Psst, 60. EPA, 61. Non, 62. Get, 64. Ish, 65. See, 66. Ham